

You Can't Make Everyone Happy

BY TIM REED

One of the hardest realities that must be constantly faced in the journey of leadership is choosing between what's *right* and what's *easy*. This battle can take a lot of different forms—cutting corners on a product to meet a ship date, lying to a client to make a sale, or choosing slow organic growth rather than selling out in order to scale. And for me, this is a battle that I face daily.

The best things in life are slow and difficult. This truth flies in the face of our current culture, which tells us that discomfort is a problem to be medicated and that instant gratification is the only type worth having.

But building a company of substance takes time—and the path is often lonely. People won't always understand, and they'll often be quick to criticize your decision to follow your principles wherever they lead.

Of course, this doesn't mean that you arrogantly charge forward regardless of the collateral damage, but it does mean that you follow your understanding of the principles your company is built on wherever they lead—and realize that not everyone will like it.

For me, this has meant saying “no” to some opportunities that came with an immediate payout, getting kicked off of boards that I've served on, and choosing not to engage in busi-

ness with people who didn't align with the convictions and principles that I follow. While this results in genuine pain, I believe that it also sets us free from the tyranny of trying to appease everyone around us.

The truth is, to grow a company of substance, you can't make everyone happy.

READY AND WILLING

The commitment to choose principles over profits—what's right over what's quick—isn't just an intellectual exercise or idealistic ignorance. It requires total abandonment. Merely discussing these ideas and failing to put them into practice is like overweight consumers watching documentaries on fitness and wondering why they

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don't see the benefits in their lives. Our companies are no different. As leaders, we have to make the daily decision to put on our shoes and exercise, or we're no different from the bloated companies of gluttony and sloth around us.

This all-in commitment requires us to ask a few critical questions: Are we ready to take it on? Are we willing to lose it all? If this entire thing blows up in our faces, did we still make the right choice?

I would argue that we did.

Because our survival as a business is not the most important thing in the world. Rather, a business of substance is like a raft guiding us to a destination. There may be a day where that raft fails and, if and when it does, there are plenty of others that we can climb aboard as we move toward our ultimate destination.

“What is so worth doing that, even if it fails, it was a worthy investment?”

Seth Godin says that most business leaders ask the following question: “What would I do if I knew it wouldn't fail?” But he argues that we should actually be asking this question: “What would I do even if I knew it would fail?” Think about that. What is so worth doing that, even if it fails, it was a worthy investment? Some things are more important than our success and achievement—and carry a ripple effect for years or decades to come—even in the face of failure. These are the things we should dedicate our lives to.

To be clear, living with this posture is sure to ruffle feathers. People will tell you that you're foolish, that you're leaving money on the table, and that your ideas are nice to think about but don't scale. Some will be so offended by your open-handed posture of generosity and service that they will actively set themselves against you. But, in the words of Jordan Pundik, “If you haven't made enemies / Then you've never stood for anything— / You're just dust in the breeze.”

Enemies come with the territory. And that's okay.

NAVIGATING THROUGH THE STORM

In July of 1970, Hewlett Packard was reeling. The entire electronics industry was in a severe recession, and companies everywhere were laying off workers left and right. The easy path would have been to follow suit, but 13 years earlier, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard had resolved on seven principles to guide their company, one of which was this: “Employees: To provide employment opportunities for HP people that include the opportunity to share in the company's success, which they help make possible. To provide for them job security based on performance, and to provide the opportunity for personal satisfaction that comes from a sense of accomplishment in their work.”

In light of this, they adopted a [“nine-day fortnight”](#) program where all workers took a 10% pay cut and a 10% reduction in workload, thus working nine days every two weeks. “The traditional way of dealing with this would simply be to lay off ten percent of the people,” wrote Bill Hewlett in

the company newsletter. “But I don’t feel that would be a very fair way.”

By letting their principles guide them, Hewlett Packard was able to save 20% on their cost of labor and weather the storm together. As the recession ended, HP was in an incredible position to capitalize on the market, and this directly led to their rampant growth in the 1970s and 80s.

This experience became one of the defining moments of Hewlett Packard’s journey, and the legend of the nine-day fortnight cemented itself in company lore—with its ripple effect inspiring workers for years to come.

Every company faces uncertainty, difficulty, and confusion as they navigate the waters of the marketplace. When the storm grows intense, you may or may not be able to see the lighthouse—but your principles can be the gauges that get you there.

While the storm is raging, the temptation is to trust your eyes and ears. But I’ve found that eyes usually wander and ears often hear only what they would like when left to their natural selves. That’s why, like Bill and Dave, going back to your principles—and following them the best you know how—is so critical. It’s not a guarantee by any means that your company will make it out (again, being governed by principles admits that there are more important things than your survival), but building a company of substance is anything but certain.

LEADING WITH LOVE

What can never be lost in the difficulty of day-to-day business is a heart of love for the people around you and the customers that they serve. This is at the heart of a company of substance. While most other companies view the accumulation of profit as what’s most important, this will never motivate the behavior of employees or inspire the loyalty of customers. What mo-

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tivates a team to pour themselves out for their company—and customers to support it unwaveringly—is the feeling that the company sees them, knows them, and cares for them.

Saint Thomas Aquinas said that [love is willing the good of the other](#), and I believe that this is truly the heart of business. Your company exists because it’s solving a problem for your customers to make their lives better. In doing so, it provides meaning, purpose, and prosperity for the people who work there. All of this is an act of love—willing the good of the other and providing them the means to achieve, at least a portion, of that good.

And love can’t be bottled up—it has to be poured out, or it stagnates and sours. This is why com-

panies obsessed with the accumulation of more inherently turn on themselves. But a company of substance is like a spring of water, overflowing into everything around it.

This open-handed, borderline reckless, mentality of generous overflow is infectious. When the people inside an organization are filled with an overflow of love from the leaders of the company willing their good (after years of simply being a cog in a wheel), they can't help but pass it on to their customers. And customers receive this like water in the desert after being treated by most companies like rats in a laboratory. This is how a business of substance grows—person by person and step by step. There's no shortcut, no hack, no silver bullet—just faithful obedience in the same direction.

So why this way?

Why choose principles over profits?

Why lead with love?

Because we want something more.

We want more than the shallow existence of most companies. We want more than the hollow pursuit of wealth.

We want to play our little part in something big—and, in doing so, experience the life that comes with fulfilling our ultimate meaning and purpose.

Building a company of substance is anything but easy. And it's anything but certain. It's slow and painful. The rent is due every morning. Many will take a different route—something easier, something faster. And they'll be quick to criticize from a safe distance. But like the [man in the arena](#), the only thing that matters is faithfully fighting the good fight. Let the critics mock—let them scoff—as they waste away

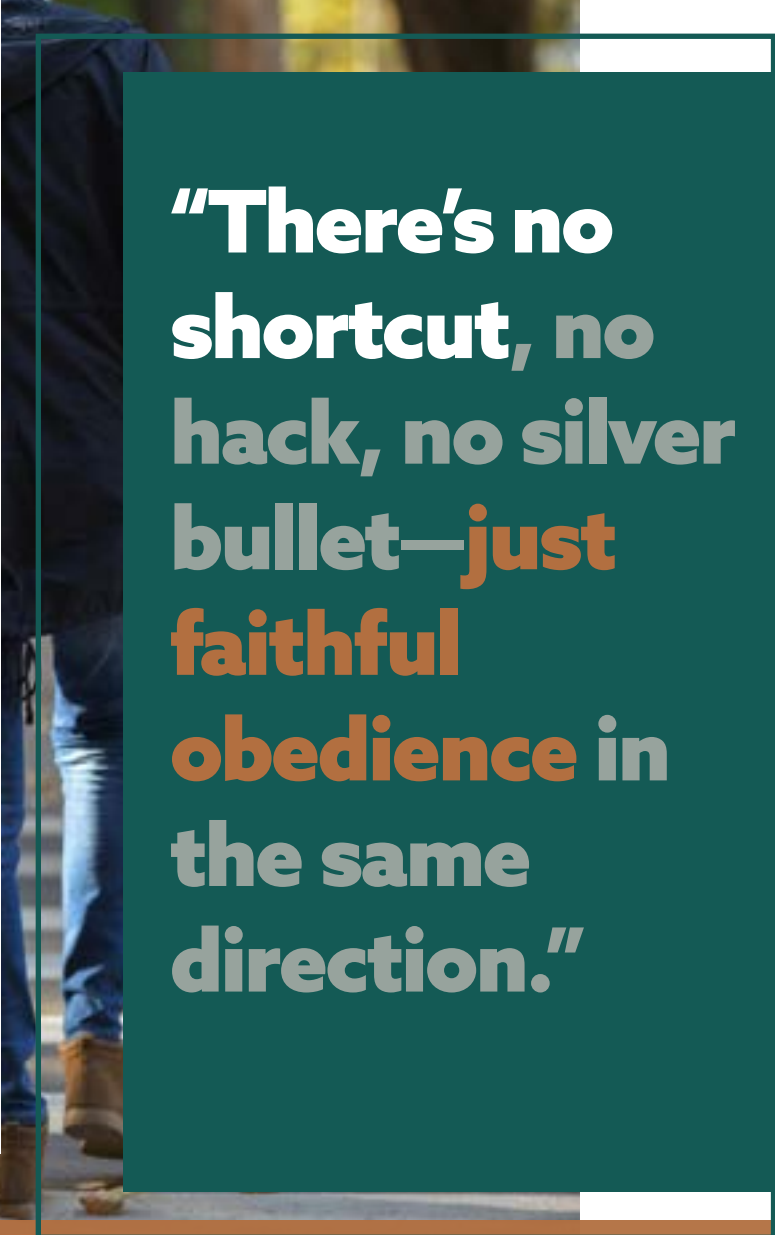
in the comfort of their crumbling towers, never knowing victory or defeat.

Your path is one of substance and goodness—of meaning and purpose.

Your company will come and go, but the path you forge will illuminate the way for others.

And this path, even if it's small and largely unseen, won't be forgotten.

It will be richly rewarded if we're faithful to follow it.



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